

PRESENTING CHRIST AS RELEVANT TO OUR PEOPLE

By R. Domenic S. Marbaniang for Mahesh Verma, Bethel Mission Society, Paliganj, Patna, Bihar

Factually speaking, there is nothing more relevant to the life and destiny of any people than the Gospel of Jesus Christ; it delivers them from the pit of destruction and places them on the path of salvation originally charted out for them. Therefore, there is nothing more relevant than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

However, the problem of relevance revolves around the people's lack of awareness of Christ as really relevant to them. Therefore, this concerns the problem of presentation or communication of the Gospel. The seed is not sown before the ground is prepared. The seed will only spring forth if the ground is suitable for it or relevant to it. Similarly, the seed of the Gospel can only find right ground in the hearts of those who are receptive to it. This receptivity is the condition of being able to find the Gospel relevant for the soul. Theologians refer to it as *preparatio evangelica* or the preparation for the Gospel. That by the way was the name of a book written by Eusebius of Caesarea who thought that the writings of the Bible were also anticipated the interpretations put forth by Plato and others. Some Indian theologians have also thought of Hinduism as containing elements that functioned as *preparatio evangelica* for the preaching of the Gospel. For instance, A. J. Appasamy found some anticipation of the Gospel in the Bhakti tradition and Sadhu Sundar Singh talked of Hinduism being the channel through which the living water of Christ was meant to flow. This fulfillment theory sees relevance as something being woven into the culture and customs of the people through God's intervention in their personal history and context.

The exclusivist position, however, treats all human elements as non-divine and therefore devoid of grace; therefore, irrelevant to the Gospel. Karl Barth called all religions and natural theology as demonic. However, Don Richardson, author of *Eternity in their Hearts* and *Peace Child* has shown how missionaries in different cultures have found elements within those cultures as relevant to and opening points for the communication of the Gospel. This concept has given rise to a method called redemptive analogy that seeks to find points of similarities in other cultures that can serve as analogies for the explanation of the Gospel. To quote Richardson's own example, and I take it from an article in Wikipedia:

Richardson studied at the Prairie Bible Institute and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. In 1962, he and his wife Carol and their seven-month-old baby went to work among the Sawi tribe of what was then Dutch New Guinea in the service of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union. The Sawi were known to be cannibalistic headhunters. Living with them in virtual isolation from the modern world involved exposure to malaria, dysentery, and hepatitis, as well as the threat of violence.

In their new home in the jungle, the Richardsons set about learning the native Sawi language which was daunting in its complexity. There are 19 tenses for every verb. Don

was soon able to become proficient in the dialect after a schedule of 8-10 hour daily learning sessions.

Richardson labored to show the villagers a way that they could comprehend Jesus from the Bible, but the cultural barriers to understanding and accepting this teaching seemed impossible until an unlikely event brought the concept of the substitutionary atonement of Christ into immediate relevance for the Sawi.

Missionary historian Ruth A. Tucker writes:

As he learned the language and lived with the people, he became more aware of the gulf that separated his Christian worldview from the worldview of the Sawi: "In their eyes, Judas, not Jesus, was the hero of the Gospels, Jesus was just the dupe to be laughed at." Eventually Richardson discovered what he referred to as a Redemptive Analogy that pointed to the Incarnate Christ far more clearly than any biblical passage alone could have done. What he discovered was the Sawi concept of the Peace Child.

Three tribal villages were in constant battle at this time. The Richardsons were considering leaving the area, so to keep them there, the Sawi people in the embattled villages came together and decided that they would make peace with their hated enemies. Ceremonies commenced that saw young children being exchanged between opposing villages. One man in particular ran toward his enemy's camp and literally gave his son to his hated foe. Observing this, Richardson wrote: "if a man would actually give his own son to his enemies, that man could be trusted!" From this rare picture came the analogy of God's sacrifice of his own Son. The Sawi began to understand the teaching of the incarnation of Christ in the Gospel after Richardson explained God to them in this way.

Following this event many villagers converted to Christianity, a translation of the New Testament in Sawi was published, and nearly 2,500 Sawi patients were treated by Carol. The world's largest circular building made strictly from un-milled poles was constructed in 1972 as a Christian meeting place by the Sawi.

Analogies of such relevance can be divided into two groups: general analogies that deal with things from the common man's world (for instance, things like mustard seed, net, pearl, etc that Jesus used in His parables); the other group are contextual analogies that relate to the culture or religion of a particular people group. The peace child is one example of it. Analogies of relevance serve as bridges of communication and one cannot but believe that those bridges were placed there by God Himself. Probably, Christ's view of the harvest being already ripe refers to this.

But one must guard against dangers as well. Such dangers are often based on misunderstandings about the nature of relevance, which I think to be chiefly four:

1. The false view that relevance is equivalent to evidence. This leads to attempts to find evidences for Christianity within the culture, religion, or religious scriptures of the particular target group. There are cases in which Christians have tried to find Christ in the Vedas; the Muslims too

attempt the same; while there are also Hindus who try to prove their teachings from the Bible. This leads to confusion since it also treats other Scriptures as proofs, which is a false method; for, if they were really reliable as such then everything written in them will then need to be accepted which is impossible.

2. The second problem is of considering relevance as an external thing only. Thus, we find some who think that a change in dress, style of worship, and other external elements can produce the impression that the message is also relevant to the culture. The anti-cultural shock can, of course, be avoided to a greater extent through all this but the only way the message can be made relevant is by making it understandable to them. Sadhu Sundar Singh talked of the Gospel as only acceptable to Indians if offered in an Indian cup. He draws the illustration of this from an incident in which he once saw a man almost dying of thirst on a railway platform, but refused to drink water when an Englishman offered it to him in a cup saying that he would only drink from an Indian cup. Sadhu himself donned the Hindu ascetic's saffron robe and practiced a typical Indian style of preaching which was appealing to the Indian audience. But Sadhu's methodology must not be taken for a principle. The principle is that the message should touch the nerves of relevance in the area of understanding. The external garb in which the message is given is only a part of the presentation problem that differs from context to context – it is not the whole thing or even the ultimate thing.
3. The third danger is the danger of compromise. This happens when the message of the Gospel is so much fused with the local theologies that the identity of the Gospel itself is lost. The Gospel cannot be made palatable to people in the same way that the seed cannot be made appealing to the ground. The ground must be prepared in order that the seed is productive in it. Examples of compromise are when Jesus is considered to be equivalent with the other avatars or incarnations of the Hindu gods, or of salvation as being limited to physical deliverances from debt and sicknesses alone.
4. The fourth problem is the problem of false relevance. This is, in fact, a logical fallacy when one falsely relates the Gospel to certain things that don't relate to it at all. For instance, one's relating Christ's sacrifice to the sacrifice of the horse in the Ashwamegha Yajna of Hinduism, or of relating the Trinity to the Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara) of Hinduism. Other false relevances relate to distortion of the Gospel through compromise with or through false appeal. For instance, inciting people to accept the Gospel in order to be emancipated from debts or business failures, or some sickness.

Those were examples of the dangers one must guard against when trying to present Christ as relevant to the people. Next, I would like to point out few principles of making Christ relevant to them:

1. The principle of respect. There is a Hindi saying according to which one must not give someone a rose to smell after cutting off his nose (or insulting him or his religion). We see Paul on Mars Hill at Athens speaking respectfully of the religiosity of the Athenians. This principle of respect

avoids making comments or doing things (including how or what we eat and how we dress) that would unwantedly close the doors for evangelism.

2. The principle of honesty. Any element of falsehood in the presentation can totally discredit the message so honesty must be evident in both the deliverance of and the living out of the Gospel among the people.
3. The principle of workability. This is the exemplification of the Gospel or the real demonstration to the world that the Gospel really works in our life. People need to see the truth and not just hear it. Anyone can preach any theory; but when people really see the Gospel working in the lives of the people through the manifestation of God's presence and power, great conviction is produced.
4. The principle of redemptive analogy; which as has already been seen involves the recognition of types, practices, and other elements that can function as the explanative grid or framework in which the Gospel can be explained or presented to them.

I believe that a consideration of what has been said in this discussion will greatly help in presenting Christ as relevant to the people. I must emphasize here again that we **present** Christ as relevant to the people; we don't **make** Him relevant to the people, as already pointed out that the ground must be prepared for the seed and not the seed made relevant to the ground. The seed is what it is and cannot be altered; similarly the Gospel also cannot be altered. It must only be presented. One doesn't need to find out how Christ is relevant to any people group. All have sinned alike and all need the Saviour. On the other hand, one needs to search for analogies of relevance in order that the Gospel be effectively transmitted. But at the end, it is the Gospel that is lived in the life of the believer that speaks louder than the words spoken by him.

God bless!